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ESTIMATES AND COMMENTS

THE LATE PROFESSOR BORDEN P. BOWNE

The death of Dr. Borden P. Bowne is a severe loss not only to Boston University and to American Methodism, which he served with distinguished ability for considerably more than a quarter of a century, but to American philosophy and theology as well, in which he has been for many years a conspicuous figure. His technical writings cover almost every important branch of philosophy, including psychology, ethics, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion, and upon all these subjects he wrote with ability and force. While some of his earlier works have been superseded at points in the progress of psychological and philosophical scholarship, they are all of them striking examples of philosophical erudition, and of the rarest sort of expository and dialectical skill. Gifted with an extraordinarily lucid mind, he was the sworn enemy of every form of obscurity and logical inconsequence. His intellectual honesty made him impatient of literary sham, of the form and parade of knowledge without the substance thereof. Himself a connoisseur in the art of putting things, he did not believe in darkening counsel with a multitude of words, and his trenchant and luminous style stands as a wholesome example to the younger generation of American philosophical writers (their name, if we are to believe Professor James, is legion) with whom an awkward and wordy style does service for insight and genuine scholarship. He was intolerant of every form of pretentiousness and bigotry, whether it shielded itself under the magical name of modern science or under the cloak of religion, and the fierceness of his polemical onslaughts, in no way mitigated by a withering sarcasm, made him an opponent much to be dreaded.

Professor Bowne's place in the history of American philosophy it is perhaps premature to estimate in any final way. He was known as a follower of Lotze, under whose influence he had come as a university student. Together with Ladd he was perhaps the leading exponent of this type of thought in America. His leading philosophical ideas were thus not original with him, in any strict sense, but are the common possession of a whole school of thinkers, the school of personal idealism. Reality, according to this school, is not definable in terms of physics or force, but in terms of consciousness. Consciousness, moreover, is not a mere collection

of passive and passing states, mere momentary and shifting ideas, as Hume had taught; consciousness, when adequately defined, can only be a conscious self or subject, the permanent and independent source of experience and of life. The universe is immaterial, conscious, and personal in its ultimate constitution: this is the grand formula of personalism! With an initial doctrine of such depth and scope, numerous special problems of philosophy and religion are solved in advance. Mechanistic naturalism which recognizes nothing in the universe or out of it but mass and motion and unbending law, that terror of timid hearts, is seen to be merely a shadow of the mind's own throwing, an abstraction of half-educated science and philosophy. The real world of experience is a world of immediate perception with its real things and qualities; the world of mechanism is a product of our analyzing and abstracting intellect, mere mass points, accelerations, and other scientific abstractions by the aid of which we hope to simplify and thus control the overwhelming complexity of living experience. Natural laws are nothing more nor less than approximate uniformities discovered within experience which we can then roughly predict and to which we can successfully preadjust ourselves. The abstract world of mechanics is a world from which all efficiency has been emptied out; the real world in which we live is a world of living personalities, pregnant with purposive agency and will, the theater of ideas and ideals, of moral imperatives and responsibilities.

Under such an interpretation of the world, also, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, as two mutually exclusive realms, is seen to be a spurious one. It is not as if nature did the bulk of the world's work while God is reserved for interruptions and interpositions. If God's power is reserved to account for breaks, exceptions, and "things science cannot explain," then the scope of God's power will be constantly restricted as the range of knowledge is extended with the progress of science, and these fugitive facts are one by one brought into relation with a general system of natural law and moral order. No, the natural roots in the supernatural, and the supernatural in turn manifests itself in the ordinary, everyday facts and forms of our living experience. This is the divine immanence which has become such a leading feature of modern thought, and upon which Christianity, according to the too sanguine view of Professor Bowne, has always insisted.

On this view, too, evolution ceases to be an object of apprehensive interest to the Christian theist. For what is evolution but the natural and orderly way of God's working? In the view of Bowne, in which the present writer fully concurs, the mere fact of evolution is, in advance of a

knowledge of its special character and direction, not capable of either theistic or antitheistic interpretation. Evolution is as such mere change, and mere change, apart from a knowledge of the character of the change, is absolutely without significance for religious theory. The important question is not by what method the world and our life have been produced, but rather what the particular method employed has effected. Is the world as we know it such that we may realize fairly well our legitimate interests and purposes in it? Are the conditions and prospects of life such that we are enabled to pronounce the world good on the whole? To put it Browning's way, do we find in this evolving world merely a wasteful and unethical display of power, or do we find love in it too? The important religious question, then, is not, Is there evolution? but, Is there progress?

Further, evolution, in the significant sense of progress, implies an end or plan in the progressive realization of which evolution consists. Evolution becomes recognizable as such only as it is the progressive approximation to some end or goal. So far from being able, therefore, to explain completely the later products of evolution by the earlier, life and mind, for example, by their lifeless antecedents, as was once the prevailing fashion, we may be obliged to explain the earlier by the later, or, more accurately, by reference to the plan involved in the process as a whole, and implicit at its every stage. Man's lowly origin in the form of his temporal antecedents has often been made the occasion for belittling his present status and his future possibilities. But this is both unphilosophical and unfair. "We have lost the memorials of our extraction," says the Roman Stoic; "in truth it matters not whence we come, but whither we go."

If once but dust or ape or worm,
A growing brain and then a soul,
Sure these are but prophetic germ
Of that which makes our circle whole.

Such are the leading ideas, freely reproduced, which formed the core of Professor Bowne's thought and teaching. During the later years of his life his literary activities consisted mainly in the popular exposition and the practical application of these germinal ideas in several theological books of a popular kind, a species of literature in which he was a veritable past master. His sound scholarship and high ideals, mated with a tactful conservatism, the token of ripe wisdom secure in its strength, made him a safe and strong leader in that uncertain period of theological reconstruction through which American theological thought has just passed. Nothing can be finer or more calculated to guide public opinion to sane and healthy

views on religious questions than the little booklets, the last products of his busy pen, *The Christian Revelation*, *The Christian Life*, and *The Atonement*, books which won the generous recognition of no less a thinker than Professor James,¹ and his two last books, addressed to a somewhat larger audience, *The Immanence of God* and *Personalism*. Views expressed in these writings concerning the meaning and authority of the Hebrew scriptures, the atonement, the future life, the divine immanence, and other current theological problems, brought him into unpleasant conflict with the ultra-conservative element in his denomination, and charges of atheism, heresy and breach of trust were brought against him by persons who probably neither understood his views nor the implications of the terms they so lightly employed. The views held by Professor Bowne were and are the commonplaces of enlightened religious thought, and if Professor Bowne erred he erred on the side of conservatism rather than on the side of too radical reinterpretation of the theological doctrines in question. These admirable last utterances reveal him as a man not only of scholarship, but as a man of tactful wisdom and discerning sympathy as well.

Had Professor Bowne chosen to devote his undivided energies to pure scholarship as his generous endowment would have suggested, the highest academic distinctions would doubtless have come to him. It is known that he actually declined professional preferment, choosing to remain in the ranks of the people who had nourished his spiritual life, and to whom, as he thought, he owed his services. He has his reward in the grateful recognition of a large host of those who have profited from his busy and fruitful thought and from his example, and who admire him for his large attainments and his fearless leadership.

Professor Bowne's scholarly and active achievements loom particularly large when compared with his personal and social life, which, according to all accounts, was one of quiet modesty and self-effacement. He was a man of unobtrusive manner, a true friend and delightful companion, fine-grained and courteous to all he met (barring always rabid theologians and "atheists," in whose presence the scholarly gentleman in him was transformed into the soldier in action); a man "of singularly pure and lovable personal character and a practical Christian experience of the most convincing kind."

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¹ " . . . those wonderfully able rationalistic booklets (which everyone should read . . .)."—*Varieties of Religious Experience*, 502.